Perspective

Remembering Benazir Bhutto

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Updated 02 Jan, 2017 01:41pm

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Benazir Bhutto takes the oath of office for prime minister on October 19, 1993 in Islamabad | AFP

She would have been 63 this year if her glorious life was not put to an abrupt end. We lost her nine years ago.

As my country floats in the historical arena like a ship lost in high waters, without a compass or a captain, we think of how Benazir Bhutto would have led us today as the leader she was — the stateswoman, mother, wife, sister and human being.

I bumped into her for the first time at a diplomatic reception in Karachi in 1991 when I was a young diplomatic correspondent. She was the darling of the media. All eyes and ears were drawn towards her when she attended events.

One day in 1992, as I entered the reporters' room at the daily *The News International*, a letter from her awaited me. It was about a suicide wave in Sindh, a cover story for the *WE* magazine of *The News*, edited by Najma Sadique. The story was about a dozen educated young men from Sindh who had committed suicide due to joblessness. BB had waved the magazine on the National Assembly floor, urging the government to look into the problem. The letter thanked me for bringing up the issue to the fore and telling me that Nisar Khuhro would be in touch with me about the story. This was my first formal introduction to the first female prime minister of Pakistan.

She was the darling of the media. All eyes and ears were drawn towards her when she attended events.

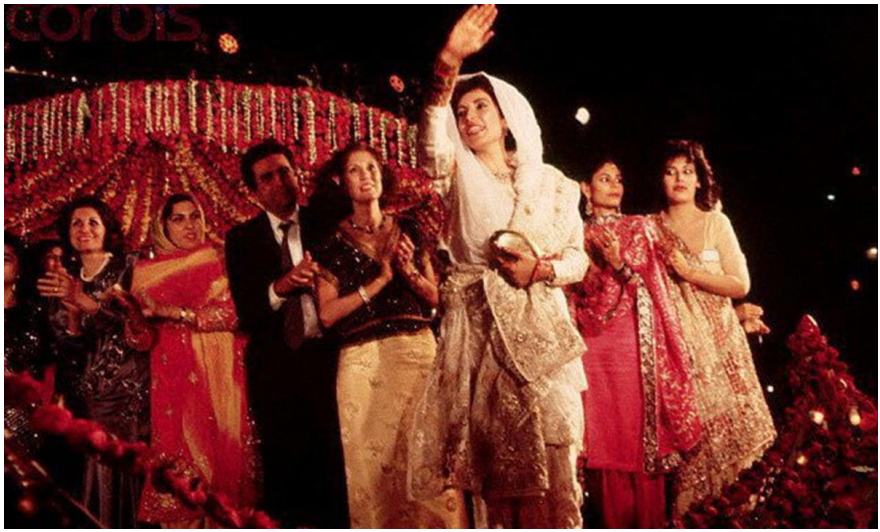
The following year, she became prime minister again.

I met her after many years in Washington DC when Pervez Musharraf was in government in Pakistan and when she was in exile again. She visited the US every year, met people at the Hill, think tanks, journalists, visited media houses, and her party supporters. We met at Voice of America News (VOA) as I worked there.

After 9/11, security was tightened across the United States. One day, as I entered the Cohen Building where VOA is housed, I saw her going through security checks at the gate. She was asked to put her things including her handbag in the tray. Finally she had to take her shoes off and put them in the tray as well. She walked barefooted through the gate. Watching the scene, I was hit by a storm of conflicting feelings. Till today, I can't figure out what went through me. However, I did convey to VOA authorities not to treat her so in future.

She would keep me posted about her major engagements, as I would interview her more often, just like Nawaz Sharif who was living in Jeddah then. She informed me in early January of 2006 that she would be in DC by the end of the month. Farah Ispahani, who used to head VOA Urdu TV, and I suggested that BB should hold a press conference at

VOA and invite the major US and international media outlets to cover it.



Benazir waves to the crowd at her wedding celebrations held in Karachi's Lyari are in 1987 | dawn.com

The date was fixed. Thursday, January 26, 2006. David Jackson, the then VOA director was in the loop and everybody was excited.

Then, out of the blue, Shaukat Aziz, then prime minister, visited the US and met President Bush on January 24. And all hell broke loose.

The State Department put tremendous pressure on VOA to cancel the event. The rationale was that it would send conflicting signals to the Pakistan government when two days after the prime minister's

White House visit, VOA was providing Benazir Bhutto with a forum to blast the Pakistan government on more than one issue, including harbouring terrorism and getting paid for it by Washington.

The Pakistani Embassy too was putting pressure via the State Department. Jackson stood his ground and didn't cancel the media conference, much to Benazir Bhutto's surprise as she later told me in an email. The compromise at VOA happened to be that she would not be received by the VOA director but instead by the head of the Urdu Service, Dr Brian Silver.

Also read: When Zardari returned home from self-exile

A few days prior to the event we organized, a story was doing rounds that her marriage was on the rocks and she and Asif Zardari were living separate lives.

Interpol was pressured by Musharraf's government to issue Red Notices to her and husband Asif Zardari. Washington was rife with rumours that she might be arrested as she lands for the press conference. Journalists kept calling me asking if she would show up. She is more familiar with handcuffs than the bangles she wears, I told an anxious journo the day before the event.

On the afternoon of January 26, the Cohen Building opened its Independence Avenue gates after a long time, a practice reserved only for the heads of states and high-profile visitors. As BB's car pulled up and the doors were opened, she and Zardari alighted from the car. Holding hands, they walked into the building.

We had placed just one chair on the podium for her but she insisted upon a second chair for Zardari. There was a scramble to pull up another chair for him at the last minute. Only then did she address the presser. And she blasted Musharraf's regime about the Interpol notices.

She visited the US every year, met people at the Hill, think tanks, journalists, visited media houses, and her party supporters.

"Show me the court that wants me in Pakistan, I will catch the next flight and be there", she roared from the podium, while taking questions from the mediapersons. The way she brought Zardari into the limelight, rejecting all rumours about their split, was novel and powerful.

Zardari and I hail from the same area of Sindh but we had not met each other until that day. I used to call him on his New York cell number or he would call me. We barely talked politics; mostly we talked

about poetry and music, especially Sindhi poetry and music. It is said that he would be disrespectful towards BB but in my observation he was quite the opposite. When BB would be in New York, he would always say, “Boss is in town!” Who commanded whom too has been talked about, more on that later.

In the summer of 2006, I went to BB's New York apartment where Zardari resided. It was a hot afternoon. The lights were on and the interview progressed. In the middle of the interview as she finished answering one of my questions, she said, “ Can you please turn off the camera?” I thought she was annoyed by my questions but she said she would be right back.

Benazir Bhutto (C) and her two daughters arrive at a press conference in Dubai on October 17, 2007 | AFP

She just moved to a side, pulled out her cell phone and called a doctor, giving the doctor the details about her daughter Aseefa, who needed some treatment. After a few minutes, she was back in interview mode.

" I had told the doctor that I will call him at 3:30 pm, so I had to," she said.

On my way back, on the Acela Express train going back to Washington, DC, I kept thinking how she smoothly switched from her role as a politician to a mother.

On August, 9, 2007, I had come back to my office after doing my show. At around 11:30 am my work phone rang. The caller ID showed a 212 area code telling me the call was from New York. It was her on the line.

"This is BB calling", she said. When did you get here, I asked as I had no prior information about this visit.

"I am here," she said.

"How can I help you," I asked.

"Come over tomorrow. Amaranth Restaurant in Manhattan, 5 pm. I will be waiting", she almost summoned me.

I said it was a working day for me, but she just repeated herself. I said, OK, I will be there.

Next day, I was back on the Acela Express to New York. As I entered the restaurant, I saw Zardari sitting right by the entrance. I met him and asked him where BB was. He pointed me to the back of the restaurant: she was busy talking to somebody while having ice cream. Many who knew her will confirm that she had a sweet tooth.

She smoothly switched from her role as a politician to a mother.

In a little while, Bilawal, Bakhtawar and Aseefa too came in, carrying shopping bags. That was the day when she told me about her plans to return to Pakistan on October 18.

"I am going back. Asif will look after my mom, kids and his business and stay in Dubai. Tell me if you want to go with me. I will ask FB [Farhatullah Babar] to book your seat on the plane. My party needs me for elections. We will win. I will be prime minister. You have to return and help us", she said.

Zardari asked me to persuade her not to go as there were serious threats to her life. I said I agreed on the threats but the void was too big to be filled by anybody other than her. At that point, BB intervened

and said Murtaza is right about it and added by saying, You had gone back to Lahore with much fanfare. What happened?

Zardari was silenced after this. She signed a copy of the second edition of her book *Daughter of the East* and that was it.

Also read: Bilawal Bhutto- The poster boy

My last meeting with her was exactly three months before her assassination. On September 27, 2007, she sent a text asking me to meet her at the Ritz Carlton Hotel at 2 pm. When I got there, Senator Akbar Khawaja, Shuja Nawaz, Zardari and a few others were there, discussing the details of her return. Refusal by Musharraf to get international security did figure in the conversation and so did the conversation with Condoleezza Rice. She did mention the obstructions created by Musharraf who did not want her to travel to Pakistan on October 18. But BB was adamant. With everything announced, I can't renege on my commitment, already announced, and it is vital for my party to be there, she stressed. The environment was a bit tense.

Little did I know that she had a rough conversation with Musharraf on the phone. All those details came out after the assassination.

During the discussion, she asked me a question. As I started to answer, a phone rang —Zardari's small Motorolla flip phone. He picked up the call and started talking. I had never seen BB so angry. "Pinky" she was called but, when angry, she turned red.

"My party needs me for elections. We will win. I will be prime minister. You have to return and help us", she said.

"Do you know that I asked Murtaza a question? It is important for me to listen to his answer. If you have to take care of your personal business, please go outside, finish your call and come back", said BB. Zardari got up, went out and came back. That showed me who called the shots in their marriage.

She remained in contact with me by phone and email till the last weeks of her life. One day, Ahmed Rashid, a mutual friend and one of the top Afghanistan experts, said she was busy talking to several people including himself when I called her and she took the call. Rashid later cracked the joke with her that it might be a Sindhi connection from Washington. She was always very kind and accommodating.

Once, she was in town but didn't meet me, so I shot her an email about it. Her confidante Senator

Akbar Khawaja called me and gave me the time to see her at 6.30 am for breakfast. I was shocked but that is the time she had and she did come to have breakfast with me while apologizing at the same time.

Benazir waves to a crowd in Lahore upon her return in 1986 | dawn.com

The cold morning of December 27, 2007, didn't start badly; I went through my daily morning routine in my apartment. A quick glance at the Pakistani news websites, checked my email, had breakfast, dressed, filled my tall coffee tumbler and I was out. The show I hosted LIVE at 8 PM Pakistan time, the time in Washington, DC was 10 am. I had to be in my office at 5am five days a week (Monday through Friday) to prepare for the show. It was just a two-member team. My producer Shehnaz Nafees – a Pakhtun young lady, who was disliked by most snobbish staffers of

the Urdu Service because of her Urdu accent – would come by 8 am and help me with some of the work.

That day too there was barely any traffic on I-395 and, in 20 minutes, I was in my office.

As I passed the red-eyed security guards, I went straight to the studio. In the studio I had small TV monitors with the audio on mute. We had Geo TV on one of the monitors, to keep us updated on what was happening in the country where our broadcasts were beaming to.

The first call was of course to Ayaz Gul whose numbers I had memorized. So what is new Ayaz, I asked. He gave me a rundown of the major stories and events taking place that day. He told me about Benazir Bhutto's rally in Liaquat Bagh Rawalpindi .

Political heat was on as both former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif were back. Both were supposed to address rallies in Rawalpindi that day. Sharif was coming to town via GT Road to mobilise the city to support his party's candidates Javed Hashmi and Hanif Abbasi who were contesting against Sheikh Rasheed (leader of Awami Muslim League).

Over the phone, Zardari said, "She has been hit. Pray for her life".

I started calling different politicians and analysts to record short interviews that I would later use during my show. Then I called Wajid Shamsul Hasan, BB's close confidante in London. As I started recording him, I also kept an eye on the TV monitors to see what was going on.

As I was recording the interview, I saw a ticker on Geo reporting a blast outside Liaquat Bagh after the rally, but it said Benazir was safe. Later I saw a news ticker quoting her chief of security Rehman Malik saying she was alright. As I was talking to Wajid Bhai, as we used to call him, I saw a missed call on my cell phone that I would always take inside the studio but would keep it on vibrating mode. It was Zardari's UAE cell number ending on*** 835.

I apologized to Wajid Shamsul Hasan and told him that I missed a call from Asif Zardari. Let me call him back and then I will call you, I said.

Over the phone, Zardari said, "She has been hit. Pray for her life". I told him that Malik had said she was OK and so did the media. He used some profanity and told me in Sindhi if I would believe them or him. I kept quiet. After a little while, the news was out. She was no more.

I still remember that day prominent op-ed writer Ayaz Amir left me a voice message on my

work phone. “My heart is torn apart. Please call me and take me online”, the message said. For days we cried. People in Washington would stop and ask if we were Pakistanis and then would say that they were sorry for our loss.

One wonders how BB would have dealt with the issues that Pakistan, the region and the world face today. I can say with a fair bit of confidence that she would have provided much better alternatives than those provided by others, her political party's government included.

Murtaza Solangi is a Pakistani journalist. He has worked at VOA Washington and headed the national radio broadcaster of Pakistan from 2008 to 2013.

She was a wonderful lady; perhaps her abilities were miscalculated by the establishment.

JALBANI BALOCH, DEC 27, 2016 09:43AM

Painful recollection of memories. There is no match and alternate of BB in Pakistani politics. She will be long remembered as a woman of courage, who laid down her life for the cause of democracy and betterment of people of Pakistan. In the end, she won

and became alive in the pages of history, and her killers lost in the Nightmare.

ANWAR MAHMOODDEC 27, 2016 10:02AM

Too sad she died like in very sad tragedy. She was the prettiest ruler in the world. I have some lines from a song sung by America's all time best voice of Nat King Cole. The lyrics are as such: I'll sigh for you I'll cry for you I'll tear the stars down From the sky for you.

ZULFIKAR AHMED, DEC 27, 2016 10:30AM

Nice article. I was abroad when that tragic event happened. Moments before, we were discussing the upcoming elections and the political scenarios in Pakistan. But then a friend called me to give that saddening news. With BB, we lost hope. She, for me and many, was hope for Pakistan. We have no one in Pakistan to match her. With hope lost, her party got filled with, mostly, opportunists. The loyal and true 'jiyalaas' were conveniently sidelined. She had vision for a country she loved the most. She aspired for a tolerant and moderate version of a religion she so much loved and prided. She defended Islam and Pakistan on global stage against the those negative perceptions. She was so true a Muslim and a Pakistani! BB, we miss you!

NAZIR MIRANI, DEC 27, 2016 10:51AM

Can not read last paragraph. tears comes out, crying // What was Benazir Bhutto, & What we ARE ??? We lost our present, Pakistan lost their future. Always LOVE you BB. & Heat your current leadership of the party.

RAM, DEC 28, 2016 04:25AM

she got killed it means she did something good for Pakistan and was going to get better at it

AHSAN GULDEC 28, 2016 07:37AM

Very well educated and cultivated lady unfortunately was married to a con man. BB has the same aspirations for Pakistan as her father. She could not have done much for Pakistan as she was held back by a money swindler and a cheater person. Hopefully one day this landlord system will come to an end and Pakistan will see progressive days.

SYED F. HUSSAINI, DEC 28, 2016 09:33AM

Thank you, Mr. Solangi!

SIDDHARTHA SDEC 29, 2016 12:02AM

I was having my breakfast at the Marriott in Mexico City when the TV in the room displayed Benazir's photographs and some old video clips. Not familiar with the language, I wondered what would have merited such a long coverage in a remote part of the world. An American family sat a few tables away. The lady seemed to be paying attention to watch my reaction. Obviously, she must have known what the

news was about. It was only upon my return to the USA I learned about the assassination. I felt deeply saddened. Not just by this latest atrocity, but by the many sad demises that the Bhutto family have had to face. ZAB and my uncle in law were classmates in India. His daughter was named Nirupama, which means the same as Benazir. So, there is a sense of a kind of personal loss too. Wish this vicious cycle of hate would end for the sake of the Bhutto family and for the country too.

KHANDEC 29, 2016 04:57PM

great article...

LIAQUAT ALI THAHEEM, DEC 30, 2016 06:07PM

A great read...Thank you Sain Murtaza

GURJANTDEC 31, 2016 08:47AM

@Anwar Mahmood beautiful lines

ANWAR MAHMOOD, JAN 01, 2017 12:54AM

Benazir had innocent and sincere habit of opening her heart to the people and mingle with them regardless of security instructions. There are always bad people hidden amongst the good ones. Bilawal is also advised that he must avoid opening his heart and mingle with crowds openly even when nice man like me would love her to mingle and get embraced.

AFGHANJAN 01, 2017 12:06PM

As has been said in the article she was amazing politician though we, Afghans do not love both

Pakistani politicians and the military Generals, but I personally appreciate her and miss her a lot being very different and prominent in all. May her soul be in eternal peace and place in Jannah.
https://herald.dawn.com/news/1153628